

# Happiness is Not Fun

Godard, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and Badiou

Michael Walsh

*Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française*, Vol XVIII, No 2 (2010) pp 29-42.

Vol XVIII, No 2 (2010)

ISSN 1936-6280 (print)

ISSN 2155-1162 (online)

DOI 10.5195/jffp.2010.211

<http://www.jffp.org>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is published by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program, and is co-sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

# Happiness is Not Fun

---

Godard, the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and Badiou

*Michael Walsh*

University of Hartford

Godard is the most contemporary of directors, one who has never set a film in the past. Yet since the 1990s he has produced a whole cycle of works whose tones are retrospective, memorial, elegaic. These include *JLG/JLG:Auto-portrait du Décembre* (1995), the much-discussed *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* (begun in 1988, completed in 1998) *2 x 50 Years of French Cinema* (commissioned by the BFI for the centennial of cinema in 1995), *The Old Place* (commissioned by the Museum of Modern Art in 1999), *On the Origin of the Twenty-First Century* (commissioned by the Cannes Film Festival for the year 2000), *Dans Le Noir du Temps* (a contribution to the 2002 compilation film *Ten Minutes Older*), and the 2006 Centre Pompidou exhibition "Travels in Utopia." This last was a retrospective in the conventional sense (screenings of four decades worth of film and video by Godard, Godard/Gorin, Godard/Mièville, etc), but was also retrospective as an installation, divided into three spaces identified as hier, l'avant-hier, and aujourd'hui (yesterday, the day before yesterday, and today), with tomorrow notable for its absence.

Much of this work has been projected in public, yet nothing mentioned here is a feature film. The 1960s were in fact the only decade in which Godard produced more features than anything else. Since 1990, he has made just six features, but more than twice as many other works -- and this is a conservative estimate that counts all eight parts of *Histoire(s) du Cinéma* as one. This sizable non-theatrical subset of Godard's output includes video essays and television commercials as well as the kinds of work mentioned above. About half of this work originates on 35 mm, and about half on video, though pieces that originate on video may be shown on film and vice versa. Some pieces are as short as two minutes (*Je Vous Salue Sarajevo*, 1993) and others as long as 260 minutes (*Histoire(s) du Cinéma*), but running times cluster at less than fifteen minutes and from 50 to 65 minutes. In other words, these pieces either are shorts or they conform to the running time requirements of television. The awkwardness of this work in relation to celluloid distribution can be seen in a U.S. distributor's decision to put

JLG/JLG together with *Germany Year 90 Nine Zero* (1991), creating a 124-minute 'double feature' that could be marketed at least to the more alternative kind of theater.

Some of this work is relatively readily available, some of it fugitive. Such vagaries of distribution mean that critical response is proportional not only to perceived artistic quality but also to availability, especially given the densely allusive nature of much of this work, which more or less requires (and certainly repays) review. Thus this essay, on *De L'Origine du XXI<sup>e</sup> Siècle* (*On The Origin of the Twenty-First Century*, henceforth *De L'Origine*) was significantly enabled by the inclusion of that title along with three other works by Godard and Mièville on the DVD *Four Short Films* released in the fall of 2006 by ECM.<sup>1</sup> My discussion will look in some detail at the structures and strategies of *De L'Origine*. Then, towards the end of the essay, as a kind of answer to some of the questions the raised by *De L'Origine*, I will turn to the rethinking of reality and the real originally undertaken by Lacan and subsequently developed by Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou.

Much of Badiou has recently been translated into English, from polemics on Sarkozy to systematic philosophical studies which seek to re-found ontology on axiomatic set theory and to distinguish "being-as-being" from the rare and incalculable experience of the event. Yet film studies is only beginning to respond. This is perhaps in part because of a certain fatigue with the very idea of theory (for a discussion, see Rodowick<sup>2</sup>), but also because Badiou, like Deleuze before him, represents a basic reorientation of much of the post-structuralist received wisdom of film studies. Badiou rejects the primacy of language, believes in eternal truths that are discovered rather than constructed by humans, and redescribes subjectivity not as universal and involuntary but as a comparatively unusual accomplishment based on fidelity to the truth of an event. Difference too is radically rethought; it is what there is in the world, and the properly political task is to overcome it.

There are some paradoxes here. It is possible to read Badiou as retrograde rather than innovative. Yet I will suggest that his work has considerable value for film studies in general, and for the understanding of *De L'Origine* in particular. However, I will find this value diagonally, not so much in the writings of Badiou that are directly addressed to cinema, but instead in his turn-of-the-millennium *Le Siècle (The Century)*. This began life as a lecture series delivered between 1998 and 2000, contains a program essay titled "Passion for the Real and Montage of Semblance", and makes for an interesting parallel with *De L'Origine*. Both Godard (born 1930) and Badiou (born 1937) offer summary accounts of the century during which much of their lives unfolded, and neither seems much daunted by the impossible problems of scale intrinsic to such a project. Of course anything as complex and gigantic as a century is in some sense unthinkable, but in their different ways, both Godard and Badiou suggest that if we simply throw up our

hands, we will likely find that some important issues are thought for us, and without our input. Badiou makes this point directly in *The Century*, in a provocative discussion of Nazism, pointing out that the Nazis themselves had no problem thinking through the concepts of fascism, so that it is politically counterproductive for us simply deny such ideas the status of thought. Badiou's book does not mention Godard, but it does place a particular emphasis on works like *De L'Origine* that use the word "century" and consciously address the concept of the century.

*De L'Origine* begins, like so many other Godard films, with a verbal text, a flash of black type on a white ground that reads "Première Image" ("first image"). This is on screen for just a couple of frames, and can easily be missed. Viewers quick enough to catch it might easily mistake it for some sort of technical marker. But of course Godard has since the beginning of his career been preoccupied with verbal signs, and is well aware that the words "Première Image" are in themselves an image, and indeed the first in the film; he might even welcome the technical marker idea as a commentary on the materiality of film/video. Note, however, that a freeze-framed review of "Première Image" reveals that the lettering is partly occluded, so that the text in fact reads "Première mage" (first magus, or first wise man). In other words, *De L'Origine* is another in the long line of Godards that actively play with the lettering of the front matter. This wordplay is generically understood as evidence of Godard's modernist reflexivity, but the specific example seems to make a more particular point, which is that there can be no easy opposition between image and word – the "first image" is verbal, but words are in themselves a kind of image.

Next come two more black and white flashframes, the numeral 2 and the numeral 1000. This is Godard's fractured rendering of the date 2000, the year of the film's release. After these three shots of graphics, which together last less than a second, there follows a color-saturated version of a memorable long take first seen towards the end of *Hélas Pour Moi* (1993). At 30 seconds, this shot runs almost ten times as long as the average shot in *De L'Origine*. The scene is set in the countryside on a brilliantly sunny summer day. The picture track shows a road lined with large trees which curves from the center of the frame to the lower left, a classical shot-in-depth that is balanced by a horizon line neatly bisecting the frame. The grass is green, the mown hay is golden, and the sound is a rapturously worshipful soprano singing in praise of a queen. Like the color saturation, this music is not present in the version of this shot seen in *Hélas Pour Moi*. In the middle distance, a tall young man in short trousers wanders across the road playing a violin, his instrument case lying open on the ground, as though he is a street musician playing for change. For the setting, this figure is comically unlikely, pointing us towards the farcical element often present in Godard, though not always acknowledged by criticism. However, if we are willing to read the musician allegorically, as a representative of the arts, then perhaps

the shot is suggesting that art is always gratuitous, always more or less out of place. In any case, from the depth of field behind the musician comes another figure just as unlikely, a man in the crisp tan uniform of a military officer, who tosses a coin into the musician's case, as though he is accustomed to encountering street performers in the middle of a country lane. This gesture modulates the allegorical possibilities of the shot, perhaps suggesting that money for the arts is typically a small-change afterthought to the military budget. The officer is in his turn followed out of the depth of field by a young woman cyclist who weaves around the musician, and says to the officer as she passes, "Au revoir, Ludovic; vous allez à la guerre?" ("Goodbye, Ludovic; are you off to war?"). In other words, the twentieth century will be not just a century of war, but a century in which war will be matter-of-fact and briskly businesslike, a century in which war will be a job like any other.

Opening shots or sequences in which typed figures populate physically beautiful spaces are not uncommon in the late Godard. Compare, for example, the shot in *For Ever Mozart* (1996) in which two men play on a road with an imaginary football, or the earlier shot in *Hélas Pour Moi* in which a lake steamer glides past a row of motionless people silhouetted on the shore. But superimposed on the implausible encounter of musician, officer, and cyclist is the main title, introduced in characteristically Godardian fashion with articulations of the meanings of individual syllables. So before we get "L'origine", we get "L'or" (gold), which is more or less the color of the wheatfield on the right of the frame. The cue is picked up in the next shot, which superimposes another golden element (a sunset on water) on another kind of origin, as a woman's hand toys with her own pubic hair. The intertext here is "L'Origine du Monde" (1866), the Courbet painting of a woman's crotch, but just in case we don't get it, we are given a quick close-up of a penis engaged with a vagina, presumably clipped from a porno. The sound to accompany this is the click of a camera shutter, as though to comment on the kinds of desire that underlie both sexually explicit realism in painting and pornographic filmmaking, and perhaps to suggest the historical passage from one to the other -- the Courbet painting that was for 120 years too scandalous to show (in 1955 it was acquired by Lacan, who kept it hidden behind an abstract panel specially made by André Masson) now hangs with the other Courbets in the Musée d'Orsay, while the desire for pornography is satisfied by the camera and the computer.

Immediately following the sound of the shutter is a burst of machine-gun fire. Like the shrieking bird heard in so many pastoral scenes in late Godard, this has the unsettling quality of the generic sample. It is such a perfect sound-effects library burst of machine-gun fire that one can't take it seriously -- yet nor can one dismiss it, since of course it has a deadly serious referent, a point pressed home in the next shot. In dead silence and slow motion, a tour bus crosses the frame from left to right. At the front of the bus

are some soldiers, and behind them are families with children looking shocked and stricken. We don't know the source of this image, but it looks like news footage from the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Of course we don't need to know the exact source – the point is that the century has seen so much of this kind of suffering. The theme continues with a female voiceover on “les hors-la-loi” (the outlaws) and how one doesn't make war on them but instead exterminates them. So the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are briskly businesslike, yet at the same time they are obscene, shattering the bounds of conventional war.

*De L'Origine* is 14 minutes long and contains as many as 240 shots. Only two of these were originally staged by Godard, and both are recycled from his earlier films. In other words, the piece is a montage or collage, made up entirely of found or re-used footage, freely mixing shots from actuality, propaganda, and pornography with images borrowed from Dovshenko, Bresson, Buñuel, Ophuls, Mizoguchi, Paradjanov, Bergman, Antonioni, Kubrick, and others. As is probably already clear, the origin of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is for Godard the story of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the seemingly forward-looking title is belied by a piece that seems to work backwards in time in 15-year increments – 1990 to 1975, 1975 to 1960, 1960 to 1945, and so on until we reach 1900. However, since any description is already an interpretation, we should be more exact and say that after its title sequence, *De L'Origine* flashes the date 1990; then, after seventy seconds of rapid montage, 1990 flashes again, followed immediately by 1975. After another three minutes of montage, 1975 flashes again, followed immediately by 1960. In other words, *De L'Origine* is punctuated and segmented by repeated dates, moving backwards in fifteen-year intervals. The sequence of dates represents an ordering, but as is typical in Godard, it also poses a question to the idea of ordering --1960 is exceptional in flashing three times, so that the period between these particular date markers can be described as either two seconds or four-and-a-half minutes, depending on how one counts.

The same sensibility, structuring while simultaneously asking questions about structuring, seems to underlie the relationship between these graphics and the rest of the imagery. Godard does not simply assign his chosen shots sequentially to their original moments in history, working instead with the montage logics of matching, mismatching, and intertextual allusion. Thus a quotation from Bergson on movement accompanies a series of three shots graphically matched on movement towards the right-hand corners of the frame (Olivier's Hamlet leaping down on his stepfather from the battlements; a hawk rising through a chroma-keyed forest; a man in camouflage, either a hunter or a soldier, raising a rifle to his eye). Elsewhere, a montage of feet begins with a barefoot bride and groom whose path is strewn with flowers, turns darker with a shot of the chained ankles of Jeanne d'Arc from Bresson, and ends with a death camp corpse being dragged away by the ankles. Elsewhere yet, a still photo of corpses in the mud is

followed by footage of a bourgeois family gathered around a player piano. The women gaze fixedly at the keys that play by themselves, while the men look up and out of frame to the right. On the face of it, the idea is that the well-off prefer to just look away from the horrors of war and death. Yet if we know the shot, which many of us do -- it is from *La Règle du Jeu* (1939) -- we know that the men are looking out of frame at a danse macabre enacted by skeletons which are part of a large clock on a nearby mantel. In other words, they are looking away from one kind of representation of death only to encounter another.

Even though the principles of *De L'Origine* are not linear, some images do belong quite precisely to the dates between which they are sandwiched. 1945 shows us death camp footage as well as the liberation of Paris (actually an event of 1944), while the one and only shot that appears between the first two flashes of 1960 is taken from Godard's breakthrough film of that year, *A Bout de Souffle* ('out of breath', though the English title is *Breathless*). Also directly appropriate to 1960 are the shots of JFK and Marilyn Monroe that appear between the second and third displays of the date. Other images belong more approximately with their time markers. 1975 begins with a shot from Kubrick's film *The Shining* (1980), and 1915 is preoccupied with the Russian Revolution of 1917. Elsewhere, things are more mediated; 1900 includes a dance sequence from Max Ophüls' *Le Plaisir* (1952), which was of course not produced in 1900 but, like much of Ophüls, is set at about that time.

Elsewhere yet, things are more metaphorical. Stalin's body lying in state, an event of 1953, appears between the markers for 1930, while the dozen shots that appear between the two flashes of 1990 include only two or three that seem to belong to the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. This sequence begins with black-and-white shots of a rushing crowd that evoke the Russian revolutionary films of the 1920s, and with shots of a public hanging, which (judging from the clothing of onlookers) date from the 1940s. But of course 1990 was a moment at which Eastern European crowds once again took to the streets and in certain cases (e.g. Romania) executed the deposed leadership. This decision to render the most recent years with footage derived from earlier periods also suggests something about Godard's conception of the century. He finds nothing much that is new in the recent past, choosing instead to see the years around 1990 as the end of something, the end of what Hobsbawm calls the "short 20<sup>th</sup> century," or what both Hobsbawm and Badiou both call the "Soviet century."<sup>3</sup> As we have seen, the most recent images in *De L'Origine* are from the wars in the Balkans, wars which can be seen as having been merely interrupted by the Soviet period.

The sequence directly depicting the Soviet century is among the bravuras of *De L'Origine*, and is worth examining in a little more detail. A cycling woman who joyfully greets Soviet-bannered trucks on the edge of a battlefield is followed by four naked young women in a plunge bath, having

fun taking turns to jump straight up into the air. Next comes a troupe of Soviet teenage dancers, also jumping high in the air, then a shot of surging Red Army crowds on a parade ground, then another shot of a woman waving enthusiastically. After this, we see a series of black and white shots of passing train cars with the word 'KONEC' (Czech for 'end') superimposed. Then crowds of men, probably prisoners of war, under armed guard while a superimposed title reads first 'GOULAG', then 'GOULAGER', then 'LAGER', punning on both the Russian and the German words for prison camp. Then a shot of a half a dozen hanged men, and a shot of a young man dying in the street. Next a bloodied face, then a high overhead of red flags in the street. After this, we join the dead Ophelia from Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948), just in time to see her trailing arm float downstream and out of frame to the left. Her body is followed across the frame by a garland of floating flowers. The next shot is the funeral procession from Dovshenko's *Earth* (1930), with the dead man borne through an apple orchard, leaves and fruits brushing his face. These last two are both medium-close shots that show the untimely deaths of physically beautiful young people, and in both cases the absence of a coffin brings us closer to a romanticized idea of nature. But tension is maintained by the contrast in screen direction (Ophelia's arm and garland move diagonally to screen left, while the young man's bier moves horizontally to screen right).

So what begins as a joyful, romantic, and cheerfully libidinal revolution devolves into a propaganda spectacle, a prison system, and a war replete with dead and wounded bodies, by turns anonymous and identifiable. This is hardly an original interpretation of Soviet history, but as Nora Alter has pointed out, Godard is not a historian in the conventional sense;<sup>4</sup> the value of his rendition lies rather in the subtleties and intricacies of the montages. This sequence mixes material staged for fiction, material staged for propaganda, and shots that look like actualities. It intercuts black-and-white with color footage, with the color sequences shifted towards red, either by the aging of unstable film stocks and/or by deliberate processing. And in a move that owes as much to Bruce Conner as to Vertov and Eisenstein, it also includes some shots (the bathing women, the waving women, the overhead of the street) that may originally have had nothing to do with Soviet history

As we have noted, the "origin of the 21<sup>st</sup> century" for Godard is the story of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I stress 'for Godard' since the opening credits add 'pour moi' ('for me'), to the main title. And for Godard, as should be already clear, the 20<sup>th</sup> century seems to have been more than anything else about wars and corpses. More than two dozen shots in *De L'Origine* (that is, about ten percent of all shots) show battles – battles in the air, battles on the sea, battles in the fields, battles in the streets, in the deserts, in the snow, in the mountains, in the rice paddies. An almost equal number of shots show people dead or dying – bloodied faces, wounded soldiers, concentration



camp victims, horse-carts carrying the piled-up corpses away. *De L'Origine* does include some famous faces (De Gaulle, Hitler, Jean Gabin) but is essentially dedicated to the unknowns, the victims, the dead.

But if *De L'Origine* was only wars and corpses it would look something like the first section of *Notre Musique* (2004), with which it does share some images but from which it is clearly different. In the book that accompanies the DVD, Godard is quoted as saying that he wanted "to cloak the memory of all the terrible crimes perpetrated by men with the faces of children and the tears and smiles of women" (*Four Short Films*, 99). Editor Michael Althern is quick to add that "of course this could only fail for there is no remedy for the horrors of the twentieth century" (99). Yet more than a trace of Godard's idea remains. *De L'Origine* includes a dozen images of happiness – a bride and groom have flowers strewn at their feet, the boy from Kubrick's film rides his tricycle around the huge hotel, a lover joins her partner in a hot spring, a young woman kisses a soldier at the liberation of Paris, a couple goes boating, a number of couples go dancing. Often enough such images are compromised, either by what follows in *De L'Origine* itself (as noted, the feet of the bride and groom are the first shot in a montage of feet that ends with actuality footage of a dead body being dragged away by the ankles), or by what we know follows in the original (the boy in *The Shining* is terrorized by his psychotic father; the dancer in *Le Plaisir* is revealed as a sick old man bizarrely feigning youth). But in the 'hell' section of *Notre Musique*, images of happiness are not present at all.

In 20<sup>th</sup>-century conditions, it is perhaps only a compromised or shadowed image that can count as an image of happiness; we might compare Marker's meditation on the image of happiness at the beginning of *Sans Soleil*, where he combines a shot of some Icelandic children walking on a road with one of a fighter jet on the deck of a U.S. aircraft carrier as well as with some black leader. In other words, (pace Althern), Godard does not necessarily propose the images of happiness as a 'remedy' for the horrors of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His juxtaposition of images does something more contradictory, more dissonant – the images of happiness make the images of horror both more and less endurable. Thus the last words spoken in *De L'Origine* (a sound bite of the last words spoken in *Le Plaisir*) might serve as a motto for the piece as a whole -- "le bonheur n'est pas gai" ("happiness is not fun").

A similar point can be made about *De L'Origine's* images of women smiling. These too are sometimes ironized, as in the case of the young woman in the 1900 section who writes "Vive la France" on a chalkboard and turns to smile, as if oblivious to the prospect of Verdun, the depression, the occupation, and the Algerian war. Elsewhere smiling women are found in crowds cheering the parading troops, or are themselves at war, like the Vietcong woman clipped from Santiago Alvarez' *79 Springs* (1969). And there is no doubt that other shots in *De L'Origine* show women being abused

and terrorized. A few shots into 1990, we are shown a porn clip in which a man urinates all over the face and into the eyes and mouth of a clearly disgusted female partner. In 1945, women and children cower from aerial attacks, and a North African woman looks on in dazed dismay as her village is attacked by colonial soldiers. Yet these images are countered by a glimpse of the love scene in the desert from *Zabriskie Point* (1970), the above-mentioned long take from the dance scene at the beginning of *Le Plaisir* and a shot that looks like a screen test of a smiling young girl. And as noted above, the first voice heard in *De L'Origine* is a powerful soprano singing a Latin libretto in ecstatic praise of a queen. We are accustomed to sudden loud swells of classical music in films by Godard, but still we don't expect to plunge so directly into such triumphalist mariolatry. As we have seen, the action in the accompanying long take complicates this meaning, but that is par for the course in Godard. My point is that the images of happiness, though clearly outnumbered by the battles and the bodies, are nonetheless insistent in *De L'Origine*.

We cannot speak of a dialog or a dialectic between these two kinds of imagery, nor even the "disjunctive synthesis" that is one of Badiou's favorite phrases from Deleuze. Instead we might talk about these juxtapositions of dancing and dying as a kind of schizophrenia or as a kind of polarization. For another example, consider the shot of Jean Seberg Godard quotes from his own *A Bout de Souffle*. This is a low angle close-up of the actress's face, the shot in which she imitates Belmondo imitating Bogart, with the gesture of running the thumbnail around the lips. The sound is the same actress from the same film, asking "Qu'est-ce que c'est, dégeue-lasse?" The point is not simply that this young American in Paris does not know this word from idiomatic French; it is that with her youth and beauty she is polarized against the very idea of the repulsive. At the same time, of course, the polarization of women and children against barbarism and degradation derives from a quite traditional coding of gender which *De L'Origine* seems to basically accept.

I will exemplify this same basic point just once more, by considering the voiceovers of Pierre Guyotat, who is heard in *De L'Origine* reading from his own work. Guyotat is usually understood as a brutalist, an extremist, tirelessly rubbing the reader's nose in blood and war and rape and shit; his prose is all cracked syntax and eccentric spelling, with half the vowels replaced by apostrophes and question marks. Often compared with Burroughs and Genet, Guyotat is redeemed for some (including Badiou) as a stylist and as a critic of militarism, imperialism, and homophobia. But the Guyotat of *De L'Origine* is strangely tender. Where a page of his fiction picked at random will describe soldiers killing a baby or having sex with a prostitute in a latrine, the passages selected by Godard are poetically rhythmic and downright romantic -- "ma chérie, sa joue roz' l'oreiller brodé d'or" (my dear one, her pink cheek the pillow edged in gold) or "rumeur

humain' arrêtée Diou m' parler d'dans l'orail'" (human rumor stopped God spoke within my ear).

My discussion of *De L'Origine* has tried to remain faithful to what I see as the basic polarities of the piece. Before concluding, I want to turn to some ideas from Lacan and Badiou, which I propose less as a resolution and more as one possible way of thinking these polarities. For Badiou (as for Žižek), Lacan is a thinker who believes not only in a reality predicated on the signifier but also in something else called the Real. The Real is by turns the body, death, and the pain of the symptom; it is whatever cannot be symbolized, whatever cannot be integrated into the infinite universe of signifiers and objects. As soon as one recovers from the calculated outrage to common sense of a distinction between reality and the Real, one recognizes that it has significant consequences for those media that have traded predominantly in an impression of reality. Perhaps the most important of these is that representation becomes as much continuous as discontinuous with the everyday conception of reality – both are attempts to come to terms with the impossible Real. This suggests one way out of the critical impasse in which reality is conceded to empiricism or positivism and is polarized against a signifying practice which is understood as the focus of theoretical interest. The challenge to traditional philosophical realism by the idea of a reality predicated on the signifier does point towards an endless freeplay of symbols and objects, but the critical fixation on this is for Badiou a new sophism. Perhaps we can instead understand both reality and representations of reality as polarized against the unspeakable, unthinkable, impossible Real. If we then propose that the work of a film (and perhaps the work of any signifying practice) is to retrieve a reality from the Real, we may have a freshly productive approach to an abiding set of problems.

In *The Century*, Badiou argues that the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen three different kinds of attitude towards the real. The first of these, discussed in the introductory "Search for a Method" as well as in a chapter titled "The Unreconciled", is the current "capitalo-parliamentary" consensus, according to which it is better to have nothing at all to do with the real. This "restoration" view, effectively resurgent in the years of reaction since 1980, is usually expressed in liberal-humane terms -- the wish to directly engage the real is understood as implicitly totalitarian and potentially highly destructive; "it is always liable to give rise to political iconoclasm, and hence Terror."<sup>5</sup> According to Badiou, what discredits this view is its disavowal of responsibility for what liberal capitalism has in fact done to humanity. The belief that it is better to simply have nothing to do with the real blithely ignores such grim facts as that the richest three people in the world have a fortune larger than the GDP of the 48 poorest countries combined, and that the world could be provided with basic nutrition, access to drinkable water, and basic health resources for the amount spent annually in Europe and the United States on perfume alone.<sup>6</sup> However ideologically effective, this liberal

capitalist repudiation of the real is for Badiou essentially an example of bad faith. This “well-tempered moralism” is “nothing but the endorsement of aseptic crimes,”<sup>7</sup> while “the century’s real problem is to be located in the linkage between ‘democracies’ and that which, after the fact, they designate as their Other – the barbarism of which they are wholly innocent. What needs to be undone is precisely this discursive procedure of absolution.”<sup>8</sup>

The other two kinds of attitude towards the real are the different versions of the “passion for the real” which for Badiou “provides the key to understanding the century.”<sup>9</sup> The first of these is associated with the period from the emergence of modernism at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century through to the disasters of Nazism and Stalinism in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and had a kind of afterlife among the more hardline leftists of the 1960s and 1970s, among whom Badiou includes himself, at least until the publication of *Being and Event* in 1988. This kind of passion for the real is convinced that the real may be discovered, accessed, even grasped, if we can just find the right kind of purifying procedures to apply to the world of appearances and semblances. Subjectively experienced as “epic and heroic,”<sup>10</sup> this passion is nonetheless misguided, trapping itself in a hermeneutics of suspicion, because “nothing can attest that the real is the real, nothing but the system of fictions wherein it plays the role of the real.”<sup>11</sup>

The real is never real enough not to be suspected of merely seeming, and the associated wish to purify or purge may easily be driven towards death and destruction. Badiou sweeps from Brecht through Pirandello to the show trials of Stalin, arguing that the modernist insistence on distancing, on laying bare the device, on aesthetic and/or political purification, has to do with a kind of passion for the real that is only further inflamed by the discovery that the real is always bound up with representation, that “la réversibilité du réel et du semblant est la seule voie d’accès artistique au réel” (the reversibility of the real and the appearance is the only way for art to access the real).<sup>12</sup> Faced with the idea from Lacan that “the experience of the real is always in part the experience of horror,”<sup>13</sup> those faithful to this first kind of passion for the real are just as likely to respond with enthusiasm as with dread. Badiou’s summary of the outcome shows that he does share at least some perspectives with the liberal critique that we have seen him so firmly reject: “Our century, aroused by the passion for the real, has in all sorts of ways (...) been the century of destruction.”<sup>14</sup>

The second kind of passion for the real is subtractive rather than destructive, differentiating rather than identitarian. In other words, it is associated with the philosophical vocabulary that Badiou has since the later 1980s made his own. It is dedicated not to the discrediting of fakes and copies in the name of an ever-receding authenticity, but to the delineation of a minimal difference between the real and the semblance or appearance. Badiou’s chief example is the Malevich of “White on White”, which he understands less as an attack on prior conceptions of painting, and more as

the demonstration of a condition generic to all painting. Instead of seeking to pierce the veil of semblance and seize the real, we are now asked to consider that “The question of the real/semblance relation will not be resolved by a purification that would isolate the real, but by understanding that the gap itself is real. The white square is the moment when the minimal gap is fabricated.”<sup>15</sup>

There is a seeming conundrum in the idea that “the gap itself is real,” since we are speaking here of the gap between the semblance and the real. However, it is just this redrawing of lines that is the point – the gap between the appearance and the real is itself real, that is, to be aligned with the real rather than with the representation. The point seems minor, even technical, but is for Badiou decisive. The gap between the real and the semblance is elusive, vanishing, but it is also constitutive of reality. “What takes place *barely* (emphasis in original) differs from the place where it takes place. It is in this ‘barely’, in this immanent exception, that all the affect lies.”<sup>16</sup> Like Beckett, like Straub/Huillet, like Kiarostami, Malevich succeeds in inventing content at the very place of this “minimal difference.”<sup>17</sup>

In recent lectures and interviews, Badiou has made a point of questioning any assumption that our political possibilities are bounded by history. Even so, it seems worth pointing that this second passion for the real has an intellectual history. That is, it is not properly conceivable until after Lacan, and is not actually conceived until after the emergence of the mature philosophy of Badiou. As noted, this begins during the 1980s, when it became evident to even the most diehard of militants that the impetus of 1968 had stalled. In his piece “Cinema as a Democratic Emblem,” Badiou suggests that “cinema has become the immediate form (or technique) of an ancient paradox, that of the relations between being and appearance.”<sup>18</sup> One result is a dog-chasing-its-own-tail kind of discussion, in which “cinema is capable of producing the real artifice of the copy of a false copy of the real, or again, the false real copy of a false real. And other variations.”<sup>19</sup> Impatience with such terminological sleight-of-hand is perfectly understandable, yet it is one of the wagers of Badiou’s philosophy (and certainly of my discussion here) that Lacan did find a new direction in thought with his idea that one can meaningfully distinguish between reality and the real. This idea is formative in Lacan as long ago as the 1955-56 seminar on the psychoses<sup>20</sup> (what is excluded from the symbolic returns in the real), but does not really occupy center stage until the ‘late Lacan’ or the ‘last Lacan’ of the 1970s (reality is premised on the signifier, but the real resists symbolization; the real is the impossible).

The work of Godard, as Godardians might expect, comes to redouble these stakes; a piece like *De L’Origine* in itself stages the impossibility but simultaneous necessity of the attempt to retrieve a reality from the Real. The consequences are both appalling and sublime. Appalling in such cases as Stalin and Hitler, who are seen in quick succession in *De L’Origine*,

immediately preceded by the image of an archaeologist carefully brushing the dirt away from a pair of skeletons found lying side by side. Sublime insofar as the images of happiness cannot (and are not really intended) to cancel or console. Their sublimity is not only dependent on but actually constituted by their juxtaposition with the bodies in the mud, the bodies in the street, the bodies in the wagons, the bodies by the railway tracks, the bodies hanging from the trees.

It would be neat to conclude by saying that the polarities I have proposed as fundamental to *De L'Origine* belong with the first kind of passion for the real, and that the ability of Godard to work so creatively with such dissonant materials belongs with the second. Yet the first of these points seems more convincing than the second. *De L'Origine* clearly shares, is in fact largely preoccupied with, both the epic and the tragic qualities of the first kind of passion for the real. Whether it shares Badiou's faith in the second is less clear. Both Godard and Badiou were born in the 1930s, and both were radicalized by the period of 1968. But Badiou has remained faithful to the event of 1968, to the extent (as noted above) of redefining subjectivity as always subsequent to an event. Godard seems more dejected. His work since the 1990s has largely replaced politics with a thematics of history and memory, with a considerable proportion of the critical literature following suit. However, at the time of writing, Godard has released to the web the trailer for a new feature. It begins with a medium shot of a windblown black woman in profile, with ocean sound effects implying that she is on the deck of a ship. The title of the film is *Socialism*. The woman speaks the following words: "Ce pauvre Europe. On n'est pas purifié, mais corrompu par le souffrance" ("This poor Europe. It was not purified, but corrupted by suffering"). With Godard returning (though perhaps only nominally) to questions of politics, while his dialog shares something even of the vocabulary of Badiou's first kind of passion for the real, it seems wiser to suspend judgement, to wait and see, rather than to insist on resolution.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Godard and Anne-Marie Miéville. *Four Short Films*. DVD. Munich: ECM, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> D. N. Rodowick, "An Elegy for Theory". *October* 122 (Fall 2007). 91-109.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes. The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*. (London: Abacus, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Nora Alter, "Theses on Godard's *Allemagne 90 neuf zero*," *Iris* 29 (Spring 2000): 119.

<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trs. Alberto Toscano. (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 28.

<sup>7</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 52.

<sup>12</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 54.

<sup>15</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 56.

<sup>16</sup> Badiou, *The Century*, 65.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Alain Badiou, "Cinema as a Democratic Emblem," *Parrhesia* 6 (2009): 1.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre III. Les Psychoses. 1955-56*. Paris: Seuil, 1981; trs. Russell Grigg, *The Psychoses. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book III. 1955-56*. (London: Routledge, 1993).